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BOOK REVIEW

La République de Chine: Histoire générale de la Chine (1912-1949)

Xavier Paulès

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Joseph Ciaudo
Ghent University, Belgium
joseph.ciaudo@ugent.be

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The book here under review is the third instalment published so far of the new general history of China edited by Les Belles Lettres, with Damien Chaussende as general editor. Marianne Bujard's & Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens' volume on the Qin and Han dynasties was published in 2017, and Gilles Guilleux's book on the People's Republic of China was released in 2018. We are now waiting for the seven remaining volumes of this ambitious *General History of China*.

Xavier Paulès's *La République de Chine* is an important piece of scholarship that offers a long-awaited up-to-date synthesis on a period of Chinese history that has somehow been neglected in French academia since the seminal works of Lucien Bianco, Alain Roux and Marie-Claire Bergère. Writing a history of China strictly limited to the Republican era is, furthermore, a task rarely performed in the West. If one sets aside the dedicated volumes of the *Cambridge History of China*, the Republican era is too seldom discussed for its own sake. It more generally finds its place in two grander narratives: it is either a preparatory stage for the Maoist era that follows or a period that is intimately connected to the end of the Qing era—Peter Zarrow (2005), for instance, wrote what could be regarded as a *History of Republican China from 1895*.¹ Rare, in fact, are the books in western languages solely dedicated to its official chronological time frame. Dieter Kuhn's *Die Republik China von 1912 bis 1937* (2007) may be another example but it leaves aside the final decade of the period. This sets a challenge to Paulès: justifying whether this chronological segmentation is pertinent from a historiographical point of view. Although he reckons that the beginning and end dates of this history could easily be moved up or downstream, Paulès nonetheless answers this conundrum positively by stating that the Republican era holds a genuine unity: "It is the time when a Western styled parliamentary democracy was possible" (*le temps d'un possible pour une démocratie parlementaire à l'occidentale*, 348 highlighted by Paulès)—a characterisation I shall discuss below.

Being part of a series, the book is prohibited from deviating from a foreordained general structure: the first part is to be chronological, the second thematic. Regarding the former, Paulès follows a classic division: after a well-rounded introduction, the initial

¹ This connection with late Qing is also hinted at in several places in Xavier Paulès' book as he draws attention to the continuity between the Republican era and the New Politics of the 1900s.

chapter is dedicated to the 1911 Revolution and its direct aftermath; the second follows with the era of cliques and warlords (1916–1928); the third delves into the Nanking decade; the last two chapters are respectively concerned with the War against Japan (1937–1945) and the Civil War (1945–1949). The second half of the book then offers general syntheses on the economy (chapter 6), state building (chapter 7), social transformation (chapter 8), and cultural renewal (chapter 9). A conclusion in “the manner of an epitaph” (341) closes the monograph by discussing other historical narratives not adduced, and the continuity or resemblance between today’s China and that of the 1930s. This main body of text is finally supplemented with numerous appendices. They include beautiful coloured maps, a succinct chronology of the period, and several figures such as a comparison between the populations or the railroad systems of different countries, the family tree of the Song family and the political testament (*yizhu* 遺囑) of Sun Yatsen (in both French and Chinese). The main body of the text also features many original photographs and drawings. A general bibliography which includes works in French, English, and Chinese closes the volume. A peculiarity here is that Paulès has singled out twelve books whose reading is deemed critical for the neophyte. Although I would not have chosen exactly the same references, his choice appears to me very pertinent.

Reviewing a book whose scope spans over four decades and that touches on so many dimensions of the history of China is no easy task, especially when one faces a work of this quality that mobilises such a vast array of references. Specialists in narrow fields will always think that information is missing or that too much insistence is given to some details not deemed important. Others could complain that the book is stronger on some aspects than on others—Paulès gives for instance much more importance to political and economic institutions than to religious ones, religious life being dealt with in about five pages.² Paulès’ fascinating and well-documented descriptions of social and cultural life under the Republic could sometimes also be regarded as Southern China-

² It is nonetheless interesting that “religious elements” find their way on to pages dedicated to other themes. Fortune tellers and geomancers are, for instance, mentioned twice elsewhere in the book as tertiary workers or in a paragraph expounding on Chinese social practices.

centred.³ But, in order to focus on what is of greater relevance and to do justice to Paulès's scholarly ambition, I am of the opinion that his book should mainly be evaluated on the general narrative it offers and the argumentation it stakes out to attain his conclusion. In the pages below, I would like therefore mainly to discuss Paulès' characterisation of the period. However, before entering into the core of my critique, I would nonetheless like to raise several disparate elements of particular interest.

The first point to underline is that Paulès' book does not simply compile a gallery of academic studies regarding the period 1911-1949. On several occasions, the author adduces original archival materials to convey his view or to nuance previous characterisations of an event (*e.g.* 53, 160, 177, or 184). In his discussion regarding the issue of refugees and circulation of people during the war with Japan, he notably points to the fact that no research has been done on the movement of the Chinese population toward the Japanese occupied zones, and, on the way, he makes reference to archives he has personally consulted that relate to this taboo subject (143-144). In general, the author's own research contributes greatly to the general picture of Chinese history. Regarding the utilisation of studies by colleagues, one could simply regret that Chinese sources are used unevenly throughout the book. They are often invoked when dealing with raw data, or when expounding on a particular topic that has been neglected by Western historiography (for instance regarding the 1930 "War of the Great Plain" *Zhongyuan dazhan* 中原大戰, 101-103, or the "party-isation" *danghua* 黨化 of society under the Guomindang, 248). However, in contrast to the numerous theories by colleagues writing in English and French that Paulès discusses, only very few, if any, Chinese historians' names are mentioned in the main text as historians whose interpretations are directly validated or challenged. Maybe remarks regarding Chinese scholarship ought to be stated in the same manner as with Western sources and not only through generalities on "Chinese scholarship" or "Marxist historiography." This is, however, a classic impediment largely shared by Western sinology, and we should all carry out a general introspective reflection on this matter.

³ An original bias - in comparison to the large majority of Shanghai-centred works -, that he has admitted in a very interesting debate over his book held at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisation on 21 November 2019. Audio in INALCO 2020.

Speaking of historiography, it should nonetheless be stressed that the author has a real grip on the previous and ongoing research in his field. Almost every sub-subject is first introduced by several commentaries on the general scholarly tendencies regarding the theme or period under discussion. Here, Paulès offers pathways through tangled historical debates and often points out insufficiently explored problems and topics. Indeed, the author really has a sharp eye for singling out possible new fields of inquiry, and I can but hope that the reading of his book will entice francophone scholars to explore them. This is particularly the case in his chapter about the Chinese economy, which is a model for the genre—it is maybe the clearest synthesis I have ever read on the topic. Aside from outlining the great tendencies of economic history, Paulès pinpoints the lack of studies in specific economic sectors (like the service industry) or the methodological issues inherent in the potential study of key dimensions of Chinese economic life, such as the problem of the recycling of objects (217). Regarding the reasons behind the Guomindang (hereafter GMD) sclerosis, he burrows into an important truth when he notes that, oddly, almost no attention has been paid to the absence of a renewal among its leaders (180). It should also be highlighted that Paulès, who is well versed in the historiography of his homeland, draws several brilliant parallels with French history (*e.g.* centralisation after revolution in a Tocquevillian sense, 47; or the comparison between the 1947–1948 elections and the electoral system under the Second Empire, 183). He additionally makes use of some analytical concepts from French history that hit the spot: Dominique Barthélemy’s notion of “political viscosity” (67) should definitely be popularised to describe the warlord era.

Thirdly, in an academic world where jargon is often preferred to literate style, it should be stressed that reading this book is a genuine pleasure. Paulès often has very witty punchlines that are certain to be quoted in future works. “The 1911 Revolution is the daughter of the telegraph” (30), “Although the old regime dies in 1901, it is buried in 1912” (348) or the harder to translate into English “Pékin n’est pas seulement un symbole, c’est aussi un pactole” (51) are representative examples. One can for sure say that Paulès has a way with words. His prose is sprinkled with *recherché* adjectives and florid verbs, while he devises very interesting appellations: warlords are referred to as “satraps.” His style will certainly shake up many literate readers. It must also be added that Paulès often offers very concrete and picturesque descriptions of daily life in

China that are very pertinent. They succeed in capturing the social universe of the time. In a word, his prose really serves the content.

This being said, let us discuss in more detail the scope and the governing principle of Paulès' *La République de Chine*. In his introduction, Paulès explains that his book is concerned only with *China proper* or the China of 18 provinces, and does not delve into peripheral territories such as Mongolia, Tibet, or Manchuria. This choice is justified—Paulès wishes to avoid the 1949 teleological narrative that anchored these non-Han territories as necessarily Chinese—but so doing raises issues. Aside from dismissing arguments that could strengthen or weaken his argumentation (what for instance to do about the Mongolian crisis under Yuan Shikai briefly mentioned p. 19?), it soon appears difficult to write a history of Republican China without Manchuria, especially after 1931. In the end, Paulès cannot forgo it. There is therefore a small discrepancy between the scope he originally sets and the history he narrates—a positive discrepancy, I would say, because Paulès shows very interesting developments regarding China outside the 18 provinces, notably when he dwells on Chinese cultural influence on its close and farther neighbors (334–339). I was surprised to learn that in the 1930s, 30% of restaurants in Lima (Peru) were run by Chinese! As such, in truth, Paulès book is not concerned only with *China proper*; it simply drops Tibet and Mongolia. However, this is but a minor detail in comparison to what appears in my eyes an incongruity of greater importance: it seems to me that Paulès' conclusion is not completely in conformity with his development.

To clarify my position right away, I should state that in my eyes both his conclusion and his development are accurate. I share his belief that the Republican era was a “time when a Western styled parliamentary democracy was possible,” yet I have understood the text that precedes this characterisation as mainly a GMD-centred history of the Republican China in which there was not much room for democracy. By pointing out this apparent *non sequitur*, I do not wish to downplay the value of Paulès' exposition: he successfully moves away from both the narrative of the teleology of Communist revolution and the modernisation theory, while providing a convincing depiction of this era. He rightly replaces the GMD in its due place: it was the main

actor on the scene, it accomplished much, and it fell out of it mainly because of contingent reasons. *La République de Chine* is a book constructed around this strong thesis. It is therefore a crucial read that strongly argues in favour of a positive evaluation of the GMD during the first half of the twentieth century. The conclusion averring that it was a possible time for democracy is simply not the one I was expecting after reading the nine chapters. After all, Paulès clearly points to the fact that the GMD was incapable of turning democratic (182–84).

In order to defend the idea that the Republican era was a “time when a Western styled parliamentary democracy was possible,” Paulès should, in my opinion, have put the emphasis on what is unfortunately a neglected aspect in *La République de Chine*: intellectual history.

Despite a recent surge, French historiography, be it of modern China or any other country, has never been very keen on intellectual history (Lilti 2014). Much justification could be raised for this judgment in general but also in the particular instance of the Republic of China. In the case at hand, it is obvious that Chinese intellectuals were not at the centre of the picture. They no longer wielded the impetus of their literati forerunners. But I cannot help but wonder how it could be possible to anatomise the Chinese Republican era as a time for a possible democracy without paying attention to the debate of political ideas. Democracy takes hold not solely in institutions, but also in the men and women who put it into practice. Paulès is aware of that, for he speaks of the “invention and diffusion of a new post-imperial political culture” (229), yet in this subsection he expounds only on architecture, symbols, and political rituals practised by speechless figures. In terms of “ideas” and debates, aside from very general remarks on the different “isms” available at the time (329–330), the book puts on display only Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People and his theory of five powers. Unfortunately, no other political figures’ or intellectuals’ positions are discussed. With an ounce of exaggeration, it is as if there was no exchange of ideas within or without the GMD. The 1930s controversy over democracy versus dictatorship is for instance missing from the frame.

Although the author justifies why he did not put more emphasis on the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) and its ideological evolution, it seems to me that he has

in fact swapped a CCP-centred history of Republican China for a GMD-centred one. Hardly any other voices are heard. Liberal intellectuals of high calibre are mentioned here and there but without hinting at the ideas they put forward. Luo Longji is referred to, for example, as a theoretician of human rights in China (185), but nothing is said about the debates over those rights. In total three pages are dedicated to the Democratic League or to its members (173, 182, 187), and they are mostly informed by Edmund Fung's vision of it. Despite their obvious failure to have much impact on political life, many political parties or movements—like the Chinese Youth Party of Zeng Qi, Deng Yanda's Third Party or Zhang Junmai's Chinese National Socialist Party—tried from the 1920s to find a place in between the GMD and the CCP. Borrowing Roger Jeans' helpful term, one could say that these self-declared third forces sketched "roads not taken" (Jeans 1992, X) that could really be regarded as a possible way to democracy in the sense of Paulès' conclusion. There was also in the 1930s a strong interest in the rural world. Many rural reconstruction movements experimented with other ways of carrying on the political organisation of society. By enlisting the rich world of political ideas and practices beyond the GMD and the CCP, Paulès could have shown with stronger arguments that the Republican era, or twentieth century China for that matter, was not simply a race to power between two soviet-style parties. This could also have prevented oversimplification and inexactness. Qualifying Liang Qichao's Progress Party (38) or Liang Shuming as conservatives without ever discussing their position or explaining the meaning of this label in the Chinese context is a little dissatisfying because it is arbitrary. Both men adhered to the Republic, and extolled some forms of socialism. Are they denoted as conservative only because of their infatuation with Buddhism or Confucianism?

Delving into the place of Confucius in twentieth century China, I should point out one specific topic in which Paulès' lack of interest in intellectual history has not served well his otherwise brilliant synthesis. His treatment of May Fourth remains mired in a monological narrative. To him, Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi are more or less the only figures of the New Culture movement—which is by the way not differentiated from the May Fourth movement. It seems that Chow Tse-tung's *The May Fourth Movement* of 1960 has remained Paulès main source of information on the topic. Without mentioning very recent studies that have insisted on the diversity of movements within May Fourth

and the attempts to subsume them under one single narrative since the time of the First United Front (Forster 2018; Kuo 2017), Paulès has missed the pluralisation and decentralisation of May Fourth (Ip et al. 2013) or the many scholarly endeavours to go “beyond the May Fourth paradigm” (Chow 2009) that started two decades ago, as well their implications for our understanding of the political debates of the time. As rightly noted by Yves Chevrier, iconoclasm was, for that matter, “not a cultural answer to a crisis of culture—a contradiction between identity and modernity—but a political response to a political crisis” (Chevrier 2007, 270). Studies in Chinese conservatism have also added very much to our understanding of the 1920s and 1930s, decades whose scholarly depictions have grown richer and more nuanced. Although pro-Confucian figures did not openly take part in the field of politics, their pleas were neither uninfluential nor disconnected from grand political issues. Contrary to what is commonly implied, Confucianism was far from buried in 1919. It is therefore a pity that this side of the story was not narrated in *La République de Chine*.

Yet, despite this criticism—which is, of course, formulated by someone interested in intellectual history—I would like to restate that Paulès’ work is a great book filled with acute insights. He succeeds in painting a comprehensive picture of the Republican era while dovetailing his depiction with a critical appreciation of the state of the art. His contribution to the reevaluation of the importance and the successes of the GMD should not be missed. It is a must-read for any francophone working on the Republican Era, and more largely on modern China.

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